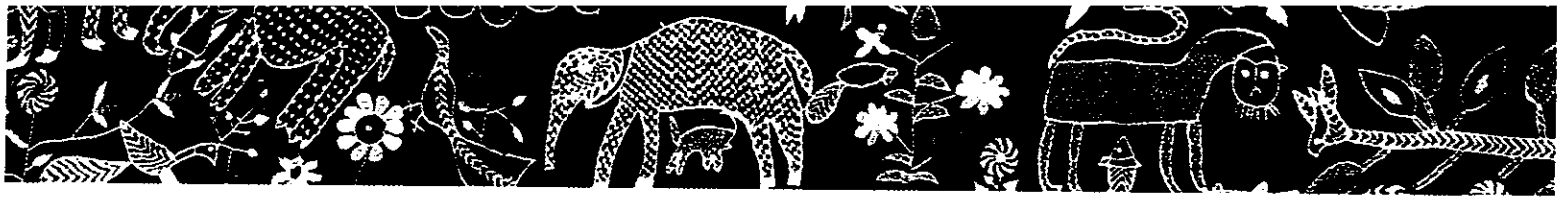

Responsive and Accountable Governance

Best Practices under the Democracy Partnership

The Asia Foundation

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Introduction

Bangladesh is home to 129 million people,[1] many of them extremely poor, making the country number 132 out of 162 on the Human Development Index rankings.[2] Bangladesh's economy is largely dependent upon agriculture, which provides 22.2% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).[3] About 80% of the population live in rural areas, but most of these people are poor day laborers or sharecroppers who have difficulty finding employment or engaging in income generating activities throughout the entire year, and who lack access to health care, sanitation facilities, good nutrition, and proper infrastructure. Educational and training opportunities are also severely lacking. Illiterate adults in the country number 75 million, which is 59.2% of the total adult population. The percentage of illiterate female adults is even higher – 70.7%.[4] Poverty, unemployment, underemployment, poor health, sanitation, and nutrition, and lack of literacy and numeracy skills are some of the barriers that hinder the lower economic classes from participating in local decision making processes and rural power structures. In addition, the political economy is organized around deeply entrenched feudal ties concentrating power in the hands of a few. Furthermore, society is strongly patriarchal, marginalizing women from the decision making process and rendering them ill-equipped to defend their own interests.

Politically, Bangladesh is a young democracy, having gained its independence from Pakistan in 1971, and having re-instituted free and fair national elections after ousting a military leader as recently as 1991. Political parties at the national level tend to rely on traditional relational ties instead of common ideologies and views on issues. Although the government has, both in the Constitution and in successive "five year plans" for development and economic growth, stated that it favors a strategy of social mobilization to empower the poor economically and politically and achieve gender equity for women, the reality of circumstances, particularly in rural areas, is that these disadvantaged groups lack access to resources, authority, influence, and justice.

In this context, the Democracy Partnership (DP) was established in 1995 as a partnership of The Asia Foundation (TAF) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), with BRAC involved in decision making processes in early years. The DP was the first major effort in Bangladesh to improve local governance in rural communities. The DP

[1] Haq, Khadija, *Human Development in South Asia 2001,* Dhaka: The University Press Limited, p. 163. Source: UNDP.

[2] United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2001,* UNDP, pp 143-4.

[3] See note 1 above, p. 157.

[4] Ibid, p. 171.

intentionally sought to make a strategic shift in emphasis from national institutions to NGOs and grassroots organizations. Program design was shaped by a USAID "customer appraisal," which indicated that poor people throughout Bangladesh view local institutions, both formal and informal, as the sources of public services most relevant to their lives. Though most Partnership resources were directed at the local level, DP support has included efforts to improve national policy, legislation, jurisprudence, and wide-scale electoral processes where these would subsequently have a direct impact on local governance.

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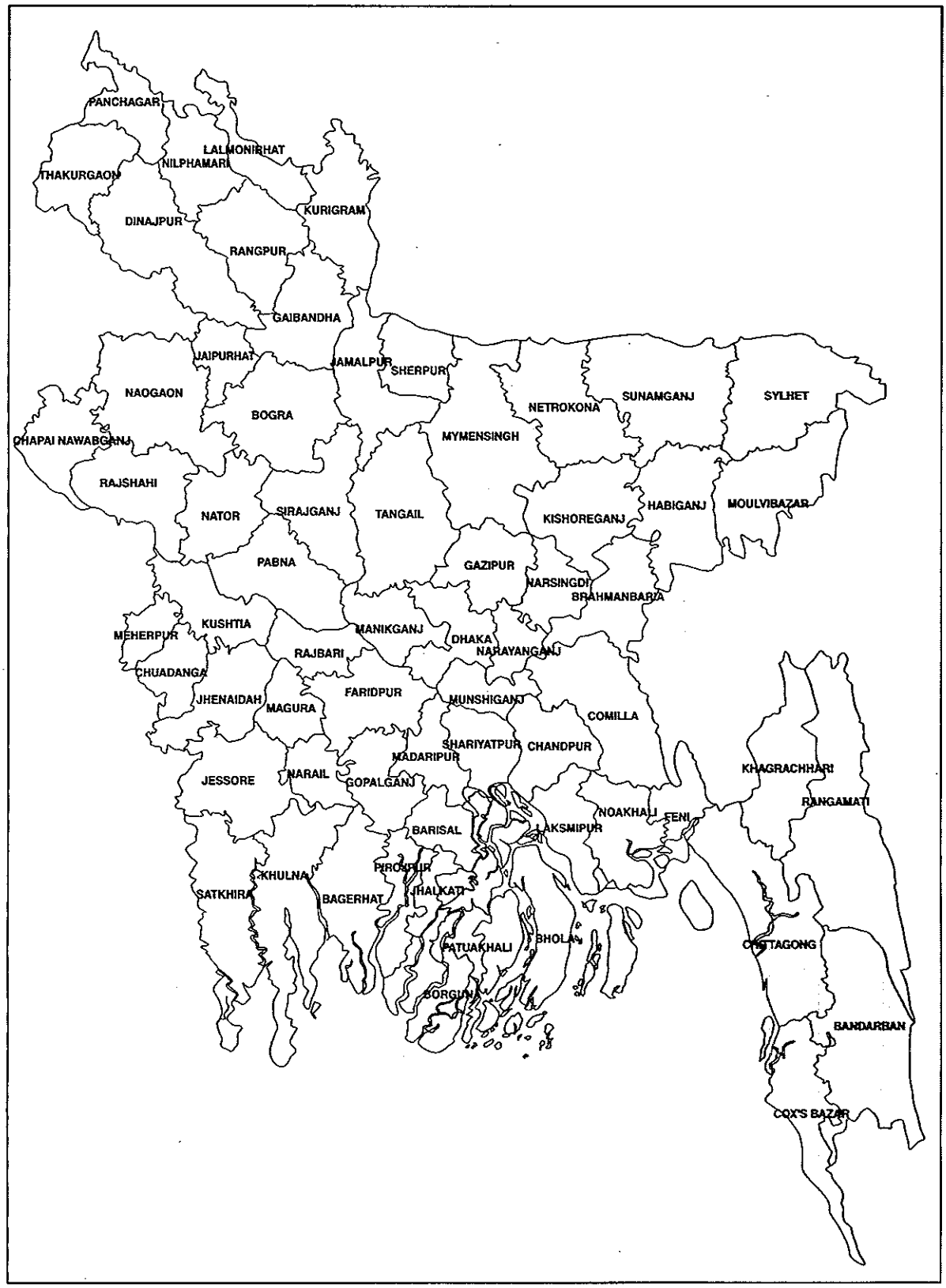
Bangladesh Map



Approach of the DP

One of the goals of the Democracy Partnership is to improve the representation of the interests of disadvantaged people in selected locations by improving the performance of government institutions. To this end, The Asia Foundation under the DP drew an its longstanding ties to local non-government organizations (NGOs) to increase the responsiveness and accountability of the level of government most directly related and best able to affect people's lives. During the decades since independence, many NGOs with strong roots in their communities had sustained rural development programs which provided basic services, but with little involvement in local government. TAF under the DP encouraged some of these local NGOs to work directly in partnership with local elected bodies and community associations in order to improve local governance, making it more responsive and accountable. TAF designed its Democracy Partnership activities regarding these objectives using a supply-demand model.

Supply-side activities focused on ways to help local elected bodies (LEBs) become more informed about and responsive to constituent interests. Efforts included broadening awareness among elected officials of their roles and responsibilities; establishing mechanisms for constituent relations; and encouraging transparency and accountability. Partnership activities improved the general skills and knowledge base of Union Parishad (UP) members and other local government officials. TAF under the DP also supported NGO efforts to increase the representation of women and association members in these local elected bodies and to enhance their influence in decision-making.

As a result of these supply-side programs, the DP has facilitated a closer relationship between local government, the community, and these six partner NGOs: Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS), International Voluntary Services (IVS), Welfare Association of Village Environment (WAVE), CARE's UPWARD project, Uttaran, and Shariatpur Development Society (SDS). These NGOs are now viewed as a resource for technical assistance and training in specialized areas, and both government officials and ordinary citizens recognize that NGO efforts have improved public awareness of good government.

Demand-side activities were designed to strengthen community-level associations, which have powerful potential to provide disadvantaged citizens with access to information about resource flows, policies, and programs that affect them. Community-level associations provide a mechanism for local citizens to interact with local government officials, articulate their interests, and hold elected and administrative officials accountable. Partnership support enabled NGOs to promote citizen interests through advocacy agendas and public interest litigation.

To address the demand-side challenges of good governance, TAF also supported NGOs which have focused primarily on community-based advocacy initiatives, emphasizing awareness

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building, organizing specific collective actions to lobby for improved community services, and mobilizing marginal groups to build up a relationship with local government institutions for the enforcement of government policies and delivery of quality public services, as well as for the creation of a platform for greater participation and the mechanisms for public accountability. The DP's three implementing organizations with this emphasis were Samata, Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS), and Bangladesh Center for Advanced Studies (BCAS).

Local Elected Bodies

Structure

For government administrative purposes, Bangladesh is divided into six divisions, 64 districts, 448 upazilas (also known as thanas), and 4,276 unions. A union ordinarily consists of ten to twelve villages and generally incorporates around 20,000 to 25,000 citizens. In each union, a council, called a union parishad (UP), is elected to serve local public needs. In the current structure, which has been in effect since 1997, the UP consists of a Chairman and 12 members.

The UP constituency is divided into nine wards. There are nine general members, one for each ward, directly elected by the voters within the ward. These candidates could be either men or women, although presently they are almost exclusively male throughout Bangladesh. In addition, three UP seats are reserved for women, each reserved seat representing three wards combined. These women members are directly elected among competing women candidates — not appointed by the UP Chairman, as was the case prior to 1997. The current arrangement means that each reserved woman member represents three times as many constituents as each general member, a situation which often affects the power dynamics of the UP.

The Chairman is the chief executive of the UP and is directly elected by all voters of the union. The Chairman could be either male or female, although currently almost all of them are men. By virtue of his position, the Chairman is a highly visible and influential person in his community. He also exerts a great deal of official authority, as he moderates all meetings, makes committee and development project assignments to members, authorizes expenditures, and relates to officials at higher levels of government.

The entire UP is elected for a term of five years. Some of the UP's formal responsibilities include maintaining law and order; developing and maintaining roads, bridges, culverts, and other infrastructure; providing services in health, education, agricultural extension, afforestation, relief distribution, and arbitration; excavating derelict public ponds; leasing out space in markets; and registering births, marriages, and deaths.

The UP relates upward to the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO), the chief administrative official at the next highest level of government, who is appointed, not elected. At the district level, the Deputy Commissioner (DC), who is also an appointed official, has oversight of the UPs in his area. At the national level, the UP comes under the auspices of the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Co-operatives (LGRDC). UP budgets are routinely scrutinized and must be approved by the UNO, DC, and Assistant Director of LGRDC. In addition, other national ministries often issue directives to the UPs on various topics.

Roles

Perhaps the most widely known and most important role of the UP is to utilize the funds that are available to it to implement projects which will lead to the greater development of its community. Funds come from various sources through the government. Money from the Annual Development Programme, designed and coordinated by national government ministries and approved by Parliament, is channeled through block grants to each upazila in the country. The Upazila Nirbahi Officer (Chief Administrative Officer) and the Chairman of the Upazila Development Committee then disburse these funds to the unions in their upazilas according to certain criteria. Most unions receive approximately one-third of their total revenue in this manner. Union parishad also collect taxes from their constituents, which they share according to a percentage formula with the upazila and district level governments.

In order to use these funds to provide services to their communities, UP Chairmen make committee assignments to each UP member, to fulfill the requirements from the central government of maintaining 12 standing committees. Due to gender bias, however, sometimes the women members are not given all the same responsibilities which their male counterparts acquire. These committees make decisions about the kinds of projects that should be implemented in their unions, such as building or upgrading roads and bridges, and providing certain health care or health information programs, education services, family welfare programs, agricultural extension projects, tree plantation projects, and water resource management projects, among others. Once projects have been identified, each member must lobby within the UP to have his or her project prioritized. The UP Chairman must then negotiate with the UNO and the DC to authorize the desired project and to secure the necessary block grant funds. The UP must also raise any other remaining resources required if the block grant is inadequate to implement the project.

In performing these tasks, the members must also work with personnel from relevant government entities. For example, to build a bridge the member must coordinate efforts with the Upazila Engineer, an employee of the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED), or to run an agricultural support program a member must work with the Upazila Agricultural Extension Officer. Deciding on the most beneficial activities for their constituents, managing the funds and human resources to accomplish these tasks, and coordinating the projects with the appropriate staff of government agencies are some of the most important roles which the UP Chairman and members play.

In the formal legal system in Bangladesh, the UP is endowed with limited authority to hear cases in village courts for minor criminal offenses and civil violations under the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961 and the Village Court Ordinance 1976. Decisions at the UP-run village court evolve through arbitration based on the opinion of the majority of members. Generally the court proceedings are run by the Chairman and involve the UP members as well as two representatives from each party to the suit. Of the representatives, one from each side must be a member of the UP. The other court members may be individuals who command a

certain degree of respect in that community. Women, even the women UP members, rarely participate on the village court because of gender biased traditions and social norms which limit a woman's physical movement beyond her community and/or hinders her from assuming leadership functions.

UP members are also given authority to hand out social welfare cards which entitle constituents to receive relief from certain government-run programs, and to enroll constituents in food-for-work projects. The Chairman usually distributes Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) cards and allowances for the elderly to UP members according to his own discretion, and the members in turn hand them out to appropriate people among those whom they represent. Similarly, the Chairman allocates a certain number of slots for food-for-work to each member, who then selects the people in his or her ward to participate.

The UP is also authorized to assess and collect certain taxes and fees — i.e., a household tax, fees charged to merchants to lease space in local markets (*hat* or *bazaar*), and fees charged for the use of a common water body *(jalmahal)*. UPs may determine these taxes according to formulas which they devise.

Another duty assigned specifically to the Union Parishad is the maintenance of many different kinds of registers, including births, marriages, and deaths, as well as registers regarding general office management, village court procedures, relief program distribution, and food-for-work program participation.

In addition, the Chairman manages a small staff made up of a secretary, several *chowkidars* and *dafadars* (local police), all of whom are hired by the upazila authorities and assigned to respective UPs. The UP Chairman also oversees the physical facilities in which the UP meets and where records are stored. In many instances, personnel and facilities are severely limited.

Challenges

Roles and Responsibilties

Various challenges hinder the efficient and productive functioning of Union Parishad. One of the most basic obstacles is that UP members and Chairmen are often unaware of their own roles and responsibilities. There is a brief government-sponsored training course conducted by the National Institute of Local Government (NILG), but it tends to focus on rote functions like maintaining the various registers, not on the complex duties of representation and management. Because this training is inadequate, and because there are only broad, not detailed, job descriptions supplied by the government, the officials themselves are mostly uninformed about their obligations. When newly elected, they are dependent for information on other UP members who are more experienced — but these individuals for various reasons relating to power dynamics and desire to control resources are sometimes quite reluctant to

share the benefit of their experiences. Furthermore, women are at an even greater disadvantage, because many of them have extremely limited knowledge of the regulations, laws, budgeting processes, and other administrative procedures of the UP, having been relegated to domestic chores most of their lives.

The reverse side of this equation is that frequently the citizens whom the UP members and Chairmen represent are also poorly informed about the roles and responsibilities of the UP and the functioning of local government. Therefore, the constituents do not understand how to hold officials responsible for their actions or decisions on behalf of the community, how to participate fully in the decision making process about the expenditure of funds or the adjudication of legal cases, or how to respond to unfair, corrupt, or negligent practices by officials which adversely affect the welfare of their communities. Without this knowledge, citizens claim a very limited role for themselves, and democratic processes are weak.

Transparency

Another fundamental challenge hindering good governance at the local level is the pervasive lack of transparency by officials. LEBs usually do not comply with requirements to hold open meetings or to publicly display the minutes of their meetings. They also do not generally sponsor open planning sessions for the determination of budgets or workplans, nor do they report these documents openly. This lack of transparency leads to a lack of accountability in the processes of budgeting and planning development projects. Consequently, UP members and Chairmen sometimes accept bribes to choose some projects over other ones, or embezzle for personal gain a portion of the funds that are meant to finance the implementation of projects.

Power Structures

Along with corruption and lack of ability is the obstacle of entrenched power structures. Influential people in the community, sometimes employing thugs or gangsters, frequently coerce UP members and Chairmen into making decisions or taking actions that will benefit their personal interests instead of the community at large, especially poor people. In the most severe cases, UP members themselves have their own coteries of hired gangsters, virtually holding constituents hostage in order to maintain their own power and financial gain. Moreover, in some instances UP members engage in internal power struggles with other UP members for status and influence, or for the opportunity to engage in corruption. These machinations and maneuvers primarily serve the self-interest of the players, not the constituents whom they represent.

Given this entrenched power structure, most NGOs and community members do not feel they have access or input into the allocation of resources or the implementation of governance at

the local level. UP members are known to make promises during an election campaign, but citizens feel they have no way to make their representatives live up to their pledges. Moreover, most local people are used to the traditional system of patron-client dependency, as opposed to enfranchised citizens demanding and expecting public service, so they have even less motivation to hold their UP member to campaign promises. On the other hand, community members also sometimes experience intimidation, as some candidates use threats and fear tactics to retain constituency allegiance. Either way, these ploys lead to a feeling of perpetual powerlessness by citizens at the local level.

Skills

Even when attempts to serve the community are sincere, poor leadership, administrative, and managerial skills create inefficiencies, incompetent oversight, and poor use of available resources. Moreover, in many cases UP Chairmen dominate decision making and activities to such an extent that others are not given the opportunity to demonstrate or improve their skills, and there is no coordinated, team effort to contribute to the good of the community – only authoritarianism by the Chairman or senior male members. Therefore, inexperience, incompetence, and high-handedness lead to further distrust of LEB capacity to make wise decisions about local community resources and serve the public good.

Centralization

An additional hindrance to good governance at the local level is the extremely centralized form of government now in place. UPs derive their authority and a substantial portion of their funds from national ministries that are constrained by the levels in between, and they must submit their budgets and their work plans to a multitude of appointed bureaucrats at these upazila and district levels. As a result, the UNOs and Chairmen of Upazila Development Committees have more de facto power over development projects in unions than the UPs themselves. Furthermore, because many unions must compete with each other for the modest financial resources available for local development, there is constant risk of promising favors or kickbacks from funds in order to get a project selected.

Another challenge is that the security and clerical staff who work at the UP level are hired by upazila level officials, and so are not motivated to follow the supervision of the UP Chairman. In addition, UPs are subject to the severely restrictive guidelines and regulations of the upazila, district, and national ministry levels of government and have very little flexibility or autonomy to enable them to be responsive to the concerns and needs of their communities.

Historical Relationship between UPs and NGOs

Over the last thirty years in Bangladesh, literally hundreds of non-governmental organizations have been formed to provide many different kinds of services for the poor, including services in health, sanitation, nutrition, agriculture, education, credit and income-generating activities, infrastructure building, rights awareness and protection, legal aid, and others. These NGOs have attempted to fill the void left by the government, which has historically provided such services inadequately or not at all. As a result, the NGO environment in Bangladesh is highly active and well-respected in society, but viewed with suspicion by many public officials, who see NGO efforts as somewhat competitive with the government itself.

Throughout the decades since independence, rural-based NGOs with strong roots in the community have continued and expanded their development programs aimed directly at the rural poor, but NGOs have been skeptical of the idea of engaging local government. Local elected bodies (LEBs) were seen by NGOs and their beneficiaries as having either limited authority or little commitment to serve the interests of their constituents. They observed the clear evidence that public services at the local level were grossly inadequate to meet the needs of the poor. Government projects — whether relief or local infrastructure projects — were seen as a means used by officials to retain local loyalty and provide favors, not to enhance the quality of life in the community.

As a result of this assessment of LEBs as having little commitment or capacity to improve conditions for local constituents, very few NGOs had projects with a targeted and sustained focus on improving the performance of local elected bodies. Before the Democracy Partnership's inception, only one of the NGO partners, Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS), had an organizational strategy that aimed to empower citizens and influence local governance. Other NGO programs were generally focused on relief, or economic development, but did not address socio-political transformation.

Based on a strong historical partnership with various government agencies and democratic institutions, as well as its large network of local partner organizations, TAF under the DP worked to strengthen the collaborative relationship between local government bodies and community-based NGOs as a means to achieve improved governance. Consequently, TAF has supported its partner NGOs to work directly with community associations and LEBs in order to improve local governance and rural justice and to involve more women in local elected bodies. Under the DP, partner NGOs have actively engaged local government officials, offering workshops, seminars, and training events to inform them about their roles and responsibilities and to make them more aware of governmental and legal systems.

The principles of partnership have been fundamental to the success of such a program. The risk of either side – NGOs or LEBs – disregarding the other, as in the past, or of overstepping one's rightful role and ending the collaboration were high. But by following a process of forging respectful and meaningful partnerships for both the NGOs and the LEBs, real change and progress were achieved, for the ultimate benefit of local citizens.

Community Advocacy

TAF partner NGOs have historically formed and mobilized groups of local beneficiaries, especially the poor and women, in order to effect efficient delivery of services like credit, adult literacy, immunizations, and sanitation and nutrition information, among others. Before the DP, however, these groups had not been used as vehicles of advocacy. The first such effort came under a pilot program in 1992 when TAF provided financial support and assistance to four of its long-term NGO partners to conduct community legal services (CLS) as a complement to their primary activities in family planning. The pilot was conducted on the premise that providing legal services and family planning can be highly complementary in terms of service delivery systems, and in program effectiveness, and findings revealed this mutual complementarity does indeed exist.[5] CLS used small group formation, the appropriation and transformation of local dispute resolution systems, the training and monitoring of key persons involved in traditional arbitration, and community mobilization as a means to achieve legal advocacy and social justice through a participatory, community-based process.

Building on this foundation, TAF under the DP sought to catalyze change in local government bodies by using a similar approach in demand-side activities, whereby partner NGOs would organize citizen groups to engage LEBs. In this setting, citizens would be able to voice their concerns, work to jointly influence priorities, and advocate for improved services and greater accountability. To this end, TAF partner NGOs have provided training and awareness-raising activities for citizens in many communities, to inform them of the roles and responsibilities of their elected representatives, and to encourage and empower them to participate more fully in their own government processes. Due to the collaborative, respectful approach utilized, elected officials welcomed this training and involvement.

TAF partner NGOs under the DP acted on the premise that real and lasting development can only be achieved through the effective participation of people in making decisions that affect their futures, and this decision making can only be possible when the people are organized to promote and protect their interests. This organized promotion of interests is at the core of advocacy and includes elections, mass mobilization, civil disobedience, lobbying, bargaining, and court actions — instruments which will lead to the establishment of a just and equitable society. In these ways, through NGOs, the media, and community-based associations, democratic processes and the rule of law are strengthened.

[5] Casper, Karen L. and Sultana Kamal, "Community Legal Services Conducted by Family Planning NGOs: An Evaluation Report Prepared for The Asia Foundation," Dhaka, 1995, p. 37.

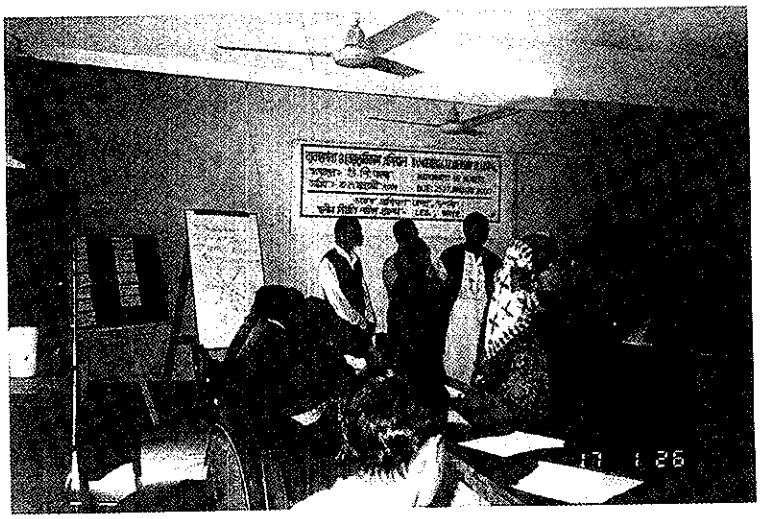
Advocates design their efforts and actions to persuade and influence those who hold political and economic power so that these formally recognized decision makers will adopt and implement public policies in ways that will improve the lives of those with less conventional political authority and fewer economic resources. To accomplish these results, advocates will initiate and undertake formal and informal actions that draw on their sources of power. These sources include organizing people to influence others through public persuasion, insistent pressure, and the use of culturally appropriate mechanisms.

Advocacy has a purposeful result — to move towards a just and equitable society by enabling the traditionally marginalized and disadvantaged to gain access to and voice in the decision making of government institutions, and to change the power relationships within and among those institutions. To this end, TAF has supported additional partner NGOs to utilize their grassroots associations in catalyzing common citizens to undertake advocacy activities with the goal of transforming traditional rural power structures and further increasing the responsiveness and accountability of local governments.

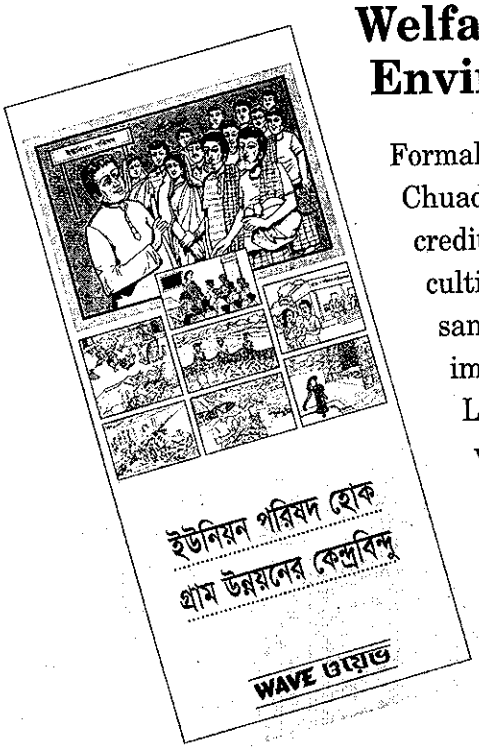
Profiles of Partner NGOs

LEBs

Interventions with UP members and Chairmen represent supply-side activities in the supply-demand model of increasing "customer satisfaction" — that is, constituent confidence in local government. The TAF partner NGOs which implemented these activities focused on ways to help local elected bodies (LEBs) become more informed about and responsive to constituent interests.



Welfare Association of Village Environment (WAVE)



Formally organized in 1990, WAVE is based at Darsana in the Chuadanga district. WAVE implements programs in micro-credit, tree plantation, fish culture, home gardening, vegetable cultivation, housing, adult and non-formal education, and sanitation. With TAF support under the DP, WAVE began implementing the project "Strengthening the Competence of Local Elected Bodies" in April, 1997. This project covers 166 villages in six unions of three upazailas in the Chadanga district.

WAVE training materials were used to strengthen the performance of union parishad members, both male and female, and stimulate continuous interaction between local elected bodies and community members. WAVE beneficiary group members are now, for the first time,

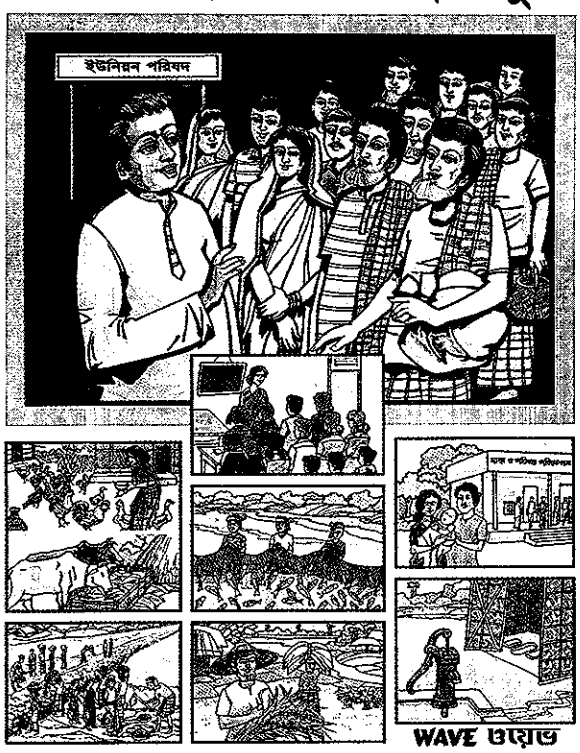
actively articulating their demands for food aid, tube wells, road maintenance, and primary education. To continue this improved constituent involvement in planning development projects, a 13-member committee has been formed in each union. In addition, with WAVE training, the local elected bodies themselves are now aware of the roles of their 12 standing committees. The training has enabled them to make these committees more functional. When constituents see evidence that the committees are operating more effectively, they have increased their compliance with and support for local revenue collection.

WAVE's training sessions have also convinced UP members to hold more regular UP meetings for the entire membership. Previously members often thought it was sufficient for the UP Chairman and a few of the senior male members to meet informally to address UP business. These UP meetings are also more often attended by agricultural department block supervisors, health assistants, family planning inspectors and other representatives of government services, in order to mobilize these workers and build their commitment to local communities. In addition, the village court operates in the UP office on a regular basis, instead of periodically, as it did previously.

In addition, WAVE sponsored gender sensitivity training for both men and women UP members, leading to the increase of women members' participation in the unions in which WAVE works. Women UP members have especially contributed to women's development issues like relief projects for destitute women and improving services provided by the Family Welfare Centre. The women UP members have also been active in making suggestions about the course of study, admission policies, and textbooks at local schools, and in encouraging poor families to seek loans from government and NGO credit sources. WAVE also facilitated the formation of associations for women UP members in an upazila. These meet regularly to provide women LEB members with valuable peer support and advice. Currently all the female members in the unions in which WAVE works are active participants in these associations.

WAVE's efforts in capacity building have included regional conferences for UP members, local elites, beneficiary group members, and journalists; workshops for annual workplan preparation by UP members; orientation and planning meetings on tax assessment and collection for UP members and constituents; motivational meetings on special issues for UP members and local community leaders; and theatrical productions to mobilize the community

for greater political participation. WAVE's innovative approach to helping UPs improve tax collection has included involving citizens in the process of tax assessment to ensure fairness and community support, and a social mobilization campaign using the motto, "If you want something from the UP, you need to pay as well." This approach has demonstrated that when ordinary citizens have confidence that taxes have been equitably assessed and are being properly allocated, they are more willing to pay their taxes. As a result, in one union tax receipts have increased by 35% over last year's collection.



CARE'S UPWARD Project

CARE USA in Bangladesh, in cooperation with other members of its international network of offices, has an extensive program in many different areas of development, with offices throughout the country and over 2000 employees. CARE implements projects in agriculture, including integrated pest management, fish and shrimp cultivation, homestead gardening, and tree plantation; in health, including family planning, maternal health, child immunizations, and HIV/AIDS prevention; in capacity building for local organizations; in disaster management; and in infrastructure development, including building and maintaining rural roads. With TAF support under the DP, CARE implemented a pilot project known as UPWARD, for "Union Parishads Working to Achieve Real Development." This pilot initiative worked to enhance the capacity of local government to plan and co-ordinate effective development initiatives with community participation and to foster accountability to their local constituencies. UPWARD covered 223 villages in nine unions in the districts of Netrakona, Gaibandha, Norial, and Jessore. The pilot was so successful that it has since been expanded into a new project, covering 200 unions.

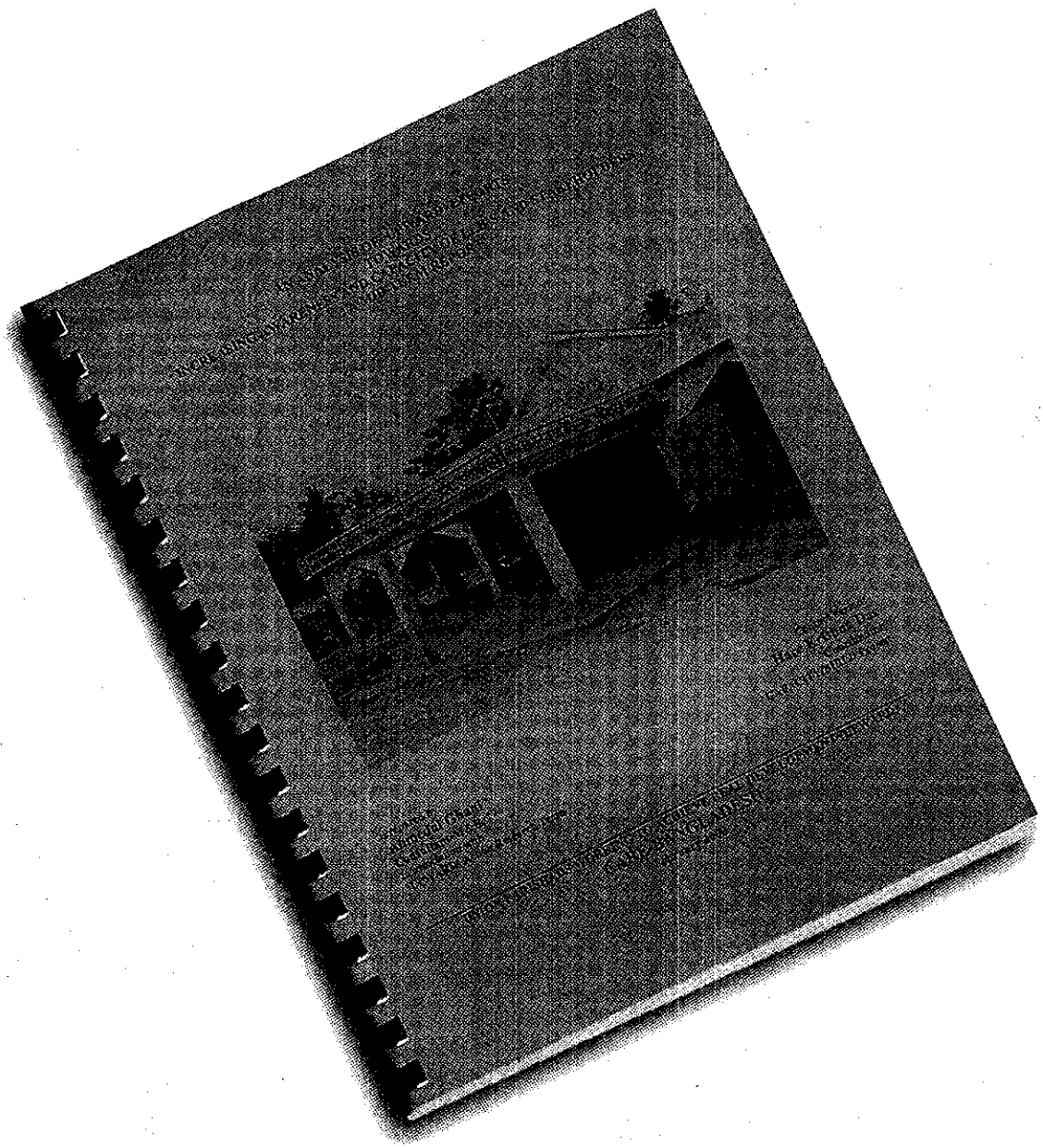
The UPWARD program was divided into three complementary activities: action research, public awareness raising, and training. The research component involved community members, especially women, in social mapping initiatives in order to identify local shortfalls in service provision and to record the resources and opportunities available in the area. This data can be utilized to increase local income earnings, both for the UP and the constituency. Conducting the social mapping enabled villagers to interact with local elected bodies and instilled a sense of accountability among the LEB members. The action research team used this process to identify unions with best practices for possible replication, including a community afforestation project that planted 58,000 trees and signed a memorandum of understanding with the UP regarding maintenance and harvest. The Upazila Nirbahi Officer and Deputy Commissioner countersigned the agreement – a significant and uncommon example of beneficial coordination. In addition, the action research team also sponsored cross-visits for UP members from different unions where best practices had been identified.

An awareness campaign was launched to educate community people as well as UP members on democratic principles and on the roles and responsibilities of LEBs and citizens. Posters on village bulletin boards, theatrical productions, familiar folk tunes with lyrics adapted to carry relevant messages, videos, TV spots, and observances of special events have also been employed to disseminate information.

Training activities were directed toward increasing UP members' knowledge about their duties and enhancing their abilities to fulfill these obligations. Topics included regularly interacting with constituents, especially with female constituents, to understand their needs and opinions; regularly attending monthly UP meetings; involving citizens in decision making about development projects; standardizing office and record management; standardizing financial management (especially tax assessment and collection); and ensuring public access

to information like the budget and resources of the UP, and marriage and death registration. In addition, training on similar topics was provided to stakeholder groups, composed of 30 selected representatives from diverse socio-economic groups from each ward in the unions, in order to increase the knowledge and expectations of common citizens about their local government. Stakeholders and UP members were then brought together in *uthan baithak* (courtyard meetings) to share information and opinions.

UPWARD has also coordinated meetings between NGO staff, officials from various departments of government, and UP members and Chairmen. At these meetings, UPs and NGOs inform each other about their activities, and sometimes they make plans on how to undertake projects jointly. This kind of coordination is quite unusual, but can ultimately be very beneficial to local communities.



Community-Based Advocacy

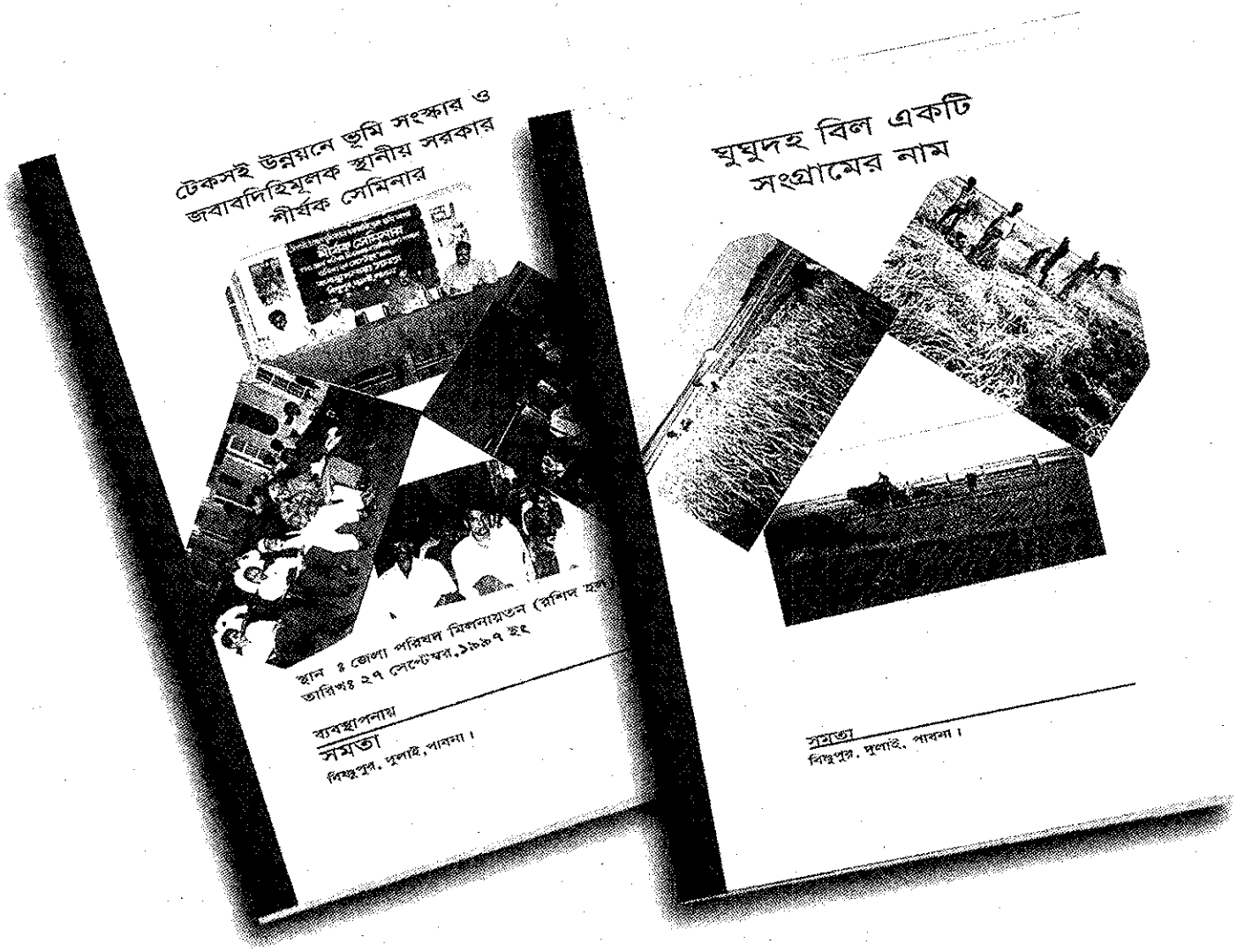
TAF-supported NGOs which focused primarily on the demand-side activities of community-based advocacy formed new or utilized existing community-level associations to provide a mechanism for citizens to interact with local government officials, articulate their interests, and hold elected and administrative officials accountable.

Samata

Samata, which literally means "equality," was started in the 1970s. Since the early 1980s it has evolved into an organization of the landless poor with a strong focus on land rights and the recovery of *khas* land (public, government-owned land) illegally occuped by rural elites. Samata is unusual among NGOs because it is governed by its members, all of whom are rural poor, through a five-tier structure of democratically elected committees. Although Samata is registered as an NGO, it is seen by its members as a movement, focusing on social mobilization and empowerment of the poor.

Samata works in 344 villages in 31 unions of 11 upazilas in Pabna and Sirajganj districts and has established a land rights network (LAND) of over 50 NGOs in northwest Bangladesh, which it supports with grants, training, mobilization support, and advice. Land distribution is a significant issue in Bangladesh, as land is a scarce and highly desirable resource given the high population density and extreme poverty of so many citizens. The Constitution and regulatory statutes guarantee access to and productive use of *khas* land to the poor. However, despite these legal protections, the distribution of *khas* land is frequently mismanaged by self-interested elites, including some government officials, who manipulate land transfer registration and other record-keeping or pay bribes or kickbacks to others to do so for them.

To address this inequitable situation for the landless poor, Samata develops groups that act as watch dogs to monitor the behavior of government officials and other elites, and as pressure groups to advocate for greater fairness and responsiveness at all levels of government. With TAF support, Samata strengthened and expanded its groups as part of the "Advocacy for Land Rights" project of the DP. Samata has identified 14,915 acres of *khas* land whose distribution



to the landless poor has been hindered by illegal land grabbing and bureaucratic mismanagement. In addition, Samata has identified numerous water bodies and embankment canals which should also be distributed to the rural poor.

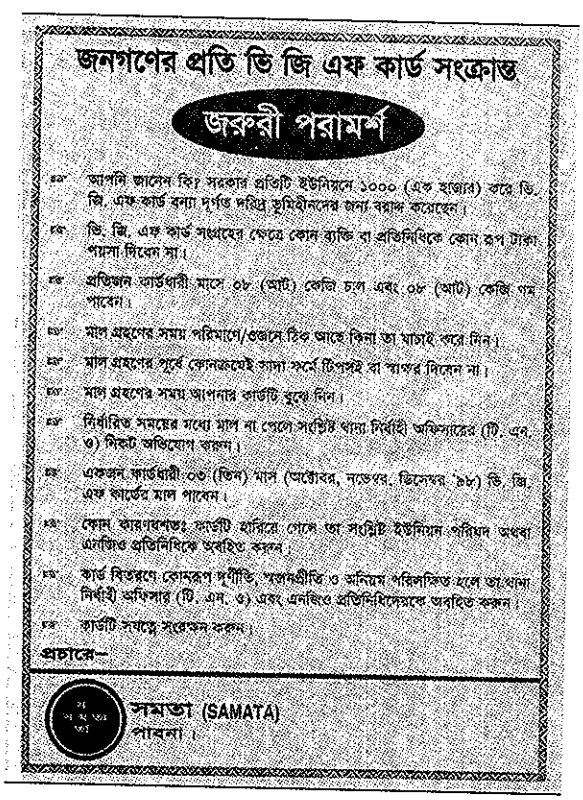
To begin work in an area, Samata conducts awareness raising campaigns, including organizing mass rallies, demonstrations, meetings, seminars, and workshops on the issues of land, water, gender, and democratic rights. Within a selected union, Samata staff approach landless people to ask them to form *samity,* or small groups, in order to promote unity and to undertake monitoring and advocacy activities. Separate groups are formed for males and females. The groups are given instruction in their Constitutionally guaranteed rights, and are organized to attend rallies and other public demonstrations. To assist with group formation, Samata has developed a standardized manual.

Training sessions in human development issues are conducted in each group to increase the discipline, analytical skills, and confidence levels among group members. These sessions are attended not only by the poor, but also by professional people and civil society members. The entire training curriculum involves workshops, seminars, group meetings, public debate forums, and theatrical productions. The programs are instrumental in developing the negotiating capabilities, interest, and enthusiasm of beneficiaries as well as their knowledge of the issues.

Samata works with community groups in its intervention areas to help them identify priority issues and to make these issues points of discussions in their communities. In this process Samata involves political activists, journalists, and other NGOs, disseminating publications and engaging in community-wide dialogue regarding their ideas on land reform and development. The issues they cover include *khas* land distribution, compost fertilizer use, health education, gender equity, and the prevention of violence against women and other violent crime. Samata also assists group members to monitor the performance of their LEBs in the duties of VGD card distribution, elderly allowance distribution, and birth and death registration, among others.

Samata's social mobilization activities include public demonstrations and rallies to advocate for greater responsiveness by LEBs. The organization has also developed strong ties with law enforcement and other officials to ensure that these events, while effective, are also peaceful – which is not always the case in many rallies in Bangladesh.

Samata groups relate directly to the Upazila Khas Land Distribution Committees in their respective areas, regularly attending their meetings and making requests for land distribution. Applications are submitted to these administrative entities for *khas* land as water resources or permanent settlements. With Samata's assistance, 3000 applications have been submitted, and 176.71 acres of water body land and 728.17 acres of permanent settlement land have been allocated among group families. If problems arise during the application procedure, Samata also arranges for legal aid for group members.



জনগণের প্রতি ভি জি এফ কার্ড সংক্রান্ত

জরুরী পরামর্শ

- আপনি জানেন কি? সরকার প্রতিটি ইউনিয়নে ১০০০ (এক হাজার) করে ভি. জি. এফ কার্ড বন্যা দুর্গত দরিদ্র ভূমিহীনদের জন্য বরাদ্দ করেছেন।
- ভি. জি. এফ কার্ড সংগ্রহের ক্ষেত্রে কোন ব্যক্তি বা প্রতিনিধিকে কোন রূপ টাকা পয়সা দিবেন না।
- প্রতিজন কার্ডধারী মাসে ৩৮ (আট) কেজি চাল এবং ০৮ (আট) কেজি গম পাবেন।
- মাল গ্রহণের সময় পরিমাণে/ওজনে ঠিক আছে কিনা তা যাচাই করে নিন।
- মাল গ্রহণের পূর্বে কোনক্রমেই কাগজ কলমে টিপসই বা স্বাক্ষর দিবেন না।
- মাল গ্রহণের সময় আপনার কার্ডটি বুঝে নিন।
- নির্ধারিত সময়ের মধ্যে মাল না পেলে সংশ্লিষ্ট থানা নির্বাহী অফিসারের (টি. এন. ও) নিকট অভিযোগ করুন।
- একজন কার্ডধারী ০৩ (তিন) মাস (অক্টোবর, নভেম্বর, ডিসেম্বর '৯৮) ভি. জি. এফ কার্ডের মাল পাবেন।
- কোন কারণবশতঃ কার্ডটি হারিয়ে গেলে তা সংশ্লিষ্ট ইউনিয়ন পরিষদ অথবা এনজিও প্রতিনিধিকে অবহিত করুন।
- কার্ড বিতরণে কোনরূপ দুর্নীতি, স্বজনপ্রীতি ও অনিয়ম পরিলক্ষিত হলে তা থানা নির্বাহী অফিসার (টি. এন. ও) এবং এনজিও প্রতিনিধিদেরকে অবহিত করুন।
- কার্ডটি সযত্নে সংরক্ষণ করুন।

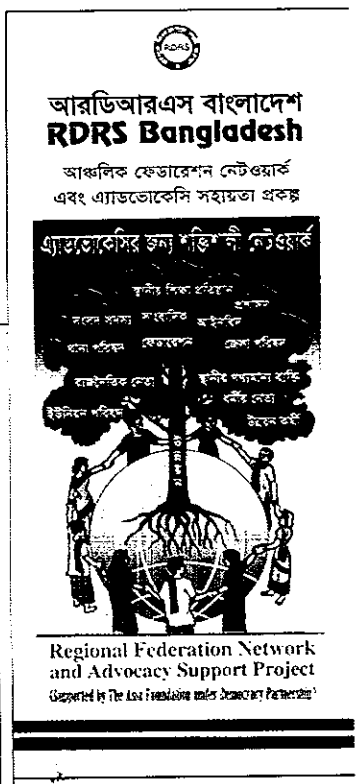
প্রচারে–

সমাতা (SAMATA)
পাবনা।

Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS)

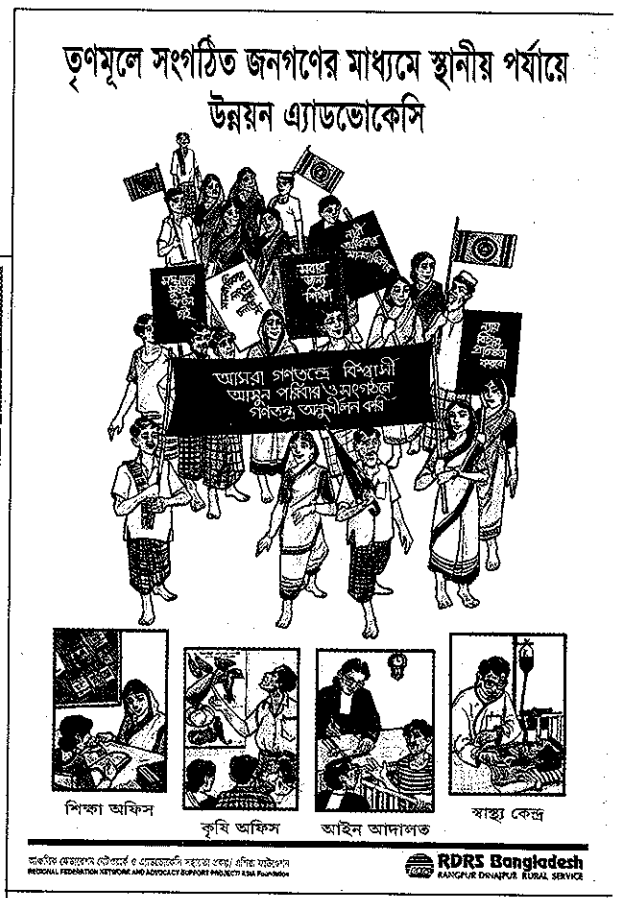
RDRS was established at the time of Bangladesh's independence in 1971, when it began to work in the remote and physically isolated northwestern corner of the country. Since that time, it has worked extensively and intensively in the very poor and backward rural areas of the Rangpur and Dinajpur districts. RDRS currently works in 29 thanas of Rangpur and Dinajpur districts. The organization provides programs in micro-credit, agriculture, health, environmental concerns, human rights, and democratization. Most recently RDRS has emphasized its work in grassroots advocacy and political participation, especially assisting women and the very poor to influence and benefit from local governance.

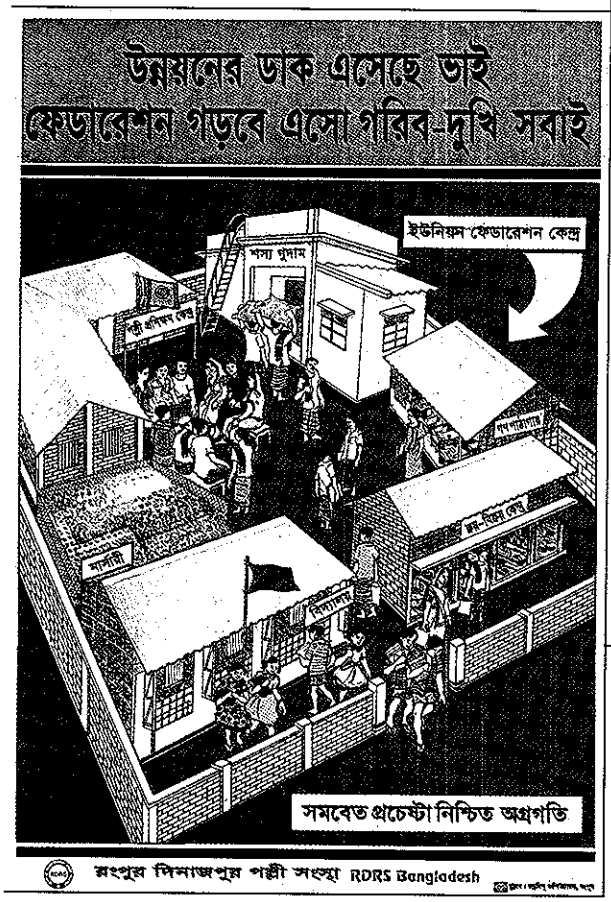
RDRS's approach consists of two tiers of group formation. Initially, RDRS sets up a primary group of 15-20 persons. Men and women are formed into separate groups. After five years



together, this group then becomes eligible for membership in a federation, which is an organization of several groups at the union level. This idea of a federation, or cluster of groups, is a new concept in Bangladesh. Under the auspices of RDRS, these federations are becoming institutionalized and are contributing to the creation of a new culture of grassroots democracy in rural Bangladesh. This approach assists the poor in networking with one another, and in advocating for their rights to fulfill their basic needs. RDRS seeks to strengthen the federations further so that they can be self-sustaining and continue to serve the interests of the poor at the union level.

Although the RDRS federations existed prior to the Democracy Partnership, TAF support under the DP enabled RDRS to scale the federations up by enhancing the capacity of the federations to develop themselves as sustainable institutions and by motivating and empowering individual members to advocate for their interests on key issues. The main intervention of the RDRS project is to raise federation members and leaders' awareness of

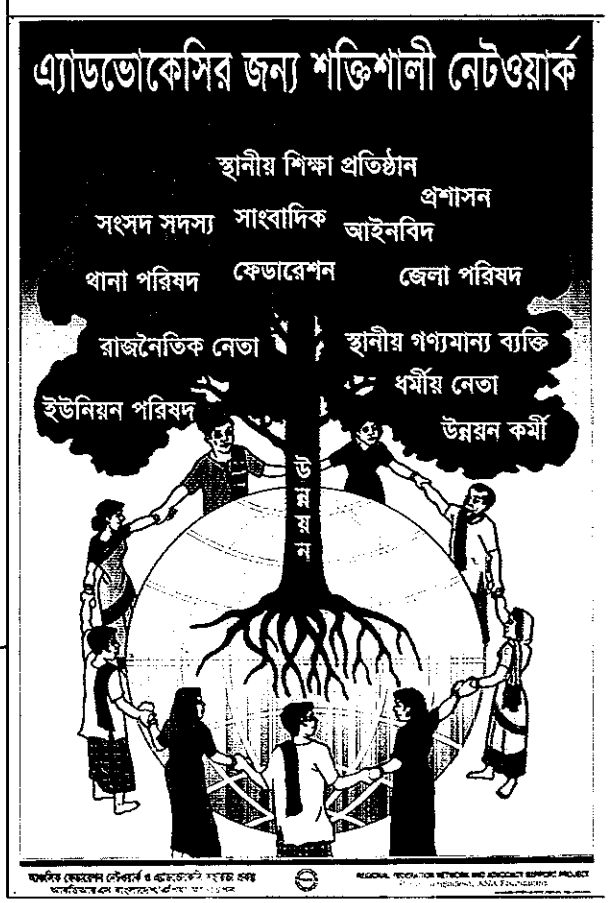




democratic processes and concepts and to provide skill training in advocacy methods. To this end, RDRS staff conduct training sessions which cover topics like the availablity of government resources and services, principles of democratic leadership, and participatory processes of planning development projects.

Part of RDRS' intervention strategy in training federation members in advocacy skills is to focus on building the capacity of one particular group in a federation to handle and coordinate much of the advocacy work of the entire federation, and then to arrange visits to that group by leaders of other groups in the same federation. These exchange visits are an innovative way to enable the stronger federation groups to explain and demonstrate the lessons learned from their experiences to other groups.

RDRS also facilitates grassroots workshops in order to generate ideas, devise strategies, and undertake actions required for local level advocacy. The workshops conducted by RDRS focus



on women's rights, children's rights, the environment, voters' roles and responsibilities, land rights, human rights, and education standards. The participants of these workshops are enabled to demand protection of these rights, enforcement of laws, and provision of services by local elected bodies.

To encourage and catalyze group members to undertake advocacy measures, RDRS engages in various activities, including staging popular theatrical shows with themes concerning exploitation of rights and pertinent local issues, and publishing a quarterly newsletter called "Songathan" which features federation news, success stories in advocacy, and other information about political participation. These methods are effective for disseminating facts and inspiring continued diligence in advocacy for groups throughout the federations.

Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS)

BCAS is a national organization which has primarily focused on proper management of the environment and natural resources. BCAS has conducted extensive research on the environmental degradation of water bodies and wetlands due to pesticides, fertilizers, over-fishing, encroachment of farm areas, and other factors. Operating in 48 villages in nine unions of three upazilas in the Gopalganj district, BCAS has mobilized grassroots participation in advocating with local elected bodies and other community leaders regarding environmental problems. BCAS programs seek to develop effective coordination among upazila and district administrators, NGOs, local elected bodies, and community members so that these critical stakeholders can work together for the sustainable development and management of wetlands and other land resources. The organization has developed methodologies to increase representation of diverse members of society in these management schemes.

Chanda Beel is a 10,890 hectare wetland in Gopalganj District. More than 60,000 people live and depend on the fish, water, plants, and trees around this *beel,* or depression. But the wetland has been exploited and degraded over the years. To identify the causes of this degradation, a field survey was conducted. Following the study, BCAS sponsored a series of workshops to provide information on wetlands and other environmental concerns to local people, including the staff and group members of other local NGOs, school and college teachers, doctors, *kabiraj* (traditional healers), fishermen, farmers, the landless poor, and the local elite.

BCAS then formed a committee of local people, including NGO staff, UP members, and community members from all social and economic backgrounds to meet together on a regular basis and discuss the proper management of Chanda Beel. After these people reached a common agreement on an agenda, a central committee was formed. Members included local representatives, the local Member of Parliament, and the relevant Deputy Commissioner.

This central committee appointed a small sub-committee to implement the actual day-to-day management of the *beel.* The members received additional training to increase their knowledge of wetlands management and to enhance their proficiency in advocacy techniques on specific issues.

BCAS continues to conduct awareness raising activities like theatrical productions, folk song performances, and printed materials to help people in the community understand the importance of managing the wetlands in their areas in order to positively affect their socio-economic condition. This awareness catalyzes local individuals to advocate collectively with their local government officials to undertake the agreed-upon activities necessary for proper management of the wetlands. The people lobby their local administration to implement

physical interventions like re-excavation of several water bodies in the wetlands and construction of gates for management of the fish. They also advocate for training sessions for fishermen, to teach them to fish selectively, and for government action to stop the toll collection imposed by upazila fishery office staff.

BANGLADESH ENVIRONMENTAL NEWSLETTER
BANGLADESH CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES

EDITORIAL

We dedicate this issue of Bangladesh Environmental Newsletter (BEN) to the memory of Dr M. Yousouf Ali. Dr Ali can truly be called the Father of Fisheries of Bangladesh. His key dedication was to develop fisheries science, data base and protect aquatic biodiversity, and wetlands as a key life supporting ecosystem in Bangladesh.

Every environmentalist in Bangladesh will miss his leadership and guidance. Our best service to his memory would be to continue the work that he had pursued all his life.

Hence it is appropriate that this issue of BEN focuses on the status of wetlands in Bangladesh in general and a participatory wetland management approach in particular. Once two thirds of the country were wetlands, which formed a unique mosaic of habitat with rich diversity of flora and fauna. The wetlands have a great ecological, economic and socio-cultural importance. But in the past decades, increasing human interventions and ill-conceived development activities have damaged the ecological balance of most of the wetlands.

BCAS in collaboration with UNDP, IUCN and the Asia Foundation has undertaken a community based resources management programme in Chanda Beel and has pioneered the efforts in compiling base data and knowledge about the wetland, understanding its ecosystem and building awareness among the local people to conserve the wetland resources and environment.

This issue of BEN also reports on the steps of a number of national and international organizations in developing tools for measuring environmental quality of Bangladesh and one of the good moves would be to establish Renewable Energy Development Authority (REDA) in Bangladesh. The other two main articles document the reactions of the environmentalists and the civil society groups to the issue of tree felling at the Osmany Uddyan and pollution in the Buriganga river. We hope to report on State of Environment (SoE) reporting in Bangladesh in the next issue of BEN.

Degrading Wetlands in Bangladesh:
Participatory Wetland Management in Chanda Beel

Wetlands are defined as areas of marsh, fen, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salty including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six meters. Bangladesh possesses enormous wetland areas, out of which the principal ones are rivers and streams, freshwater lakes and marshes including haors, baors and beels, water storage reservoirs, fish ponds, flooded cultivated fields and estuarine systems with extensive mangrove swamps. The total area of the wetlands in the country has been estimated at seven to eight million hectares, or about 50 percent of the total land surface. The important coastal and inland wetlands encompass the vast floodplains and delta system of the Ganges, Meghna and Brahmaputra rivers. The major wetlands of Bangladesh are: *• Ramsagar • Medo beel • Panguar haor • Aila beel • Dekhar haor • Kuri beel • Enalibeel • Chandabeel • Dubaar haor • Hakaluki haor • Kawadighi haor • Hail haor • Beel Bhatia • Cholan beel • Ata Danga haor • Kopai lake • Bogakine lake • Sundarban West • Sundarban South • Sundarban East • Chakaria Sundarbans • Naf estuary and • St Martin's island and reef.*

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Measuring Environmental Quality: Searching for a Methodology

Environmental Quality Indicators (EQI) are being increasingly recognized as very useful tools for measuring environmental quality. During the past decades inspired by the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, various International Institutes such as World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB), World Resources Institute (WRI), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) etc. have compiled and published hundreds of environment related indicators. The process of developing useful indicators has been hampered by the uncertainty regarding what to measure and how to measure in order to characterize the 'environment'.

Contd on pages 3

OBITUARY

Dr M Yousouf Ali, Former Secretary of Fisheries and Livestock, Govt. of Bangladesh and Head of Fisheries Division, Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS), passed away on Saturday, 31 July, 1999 at 1-25 P.M. at the Combined Military Hospital (CMH) Dhaka. He was 76.

He left behind one daughter, son in law and several grand children.

Dr Ali was Bangladesh's most outstanding fisheries expert and a leading environmentalist. A leading policy maker, he served in the subsequent Governments of Bengal, Pakistan and Bangladesh culminating his extended distinguished career as Secretary, Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock. He was a prolific author and the two recent books were "Fish Water and People" and "Open Water Fisheries of Bangladesh", both published by UPL. He was also the author of over one hundred publications, reviews and advisory analyses on fisheries, wetlands, aquatic environment and sustainable development and management practices.

He initiated the research and undertook the first successful experiment on carp fish breeding of carps which opened the door of aquaculture expansion in Bangladesh. He dedicated his life for the protection of fisheries habitats and aquatic resources.

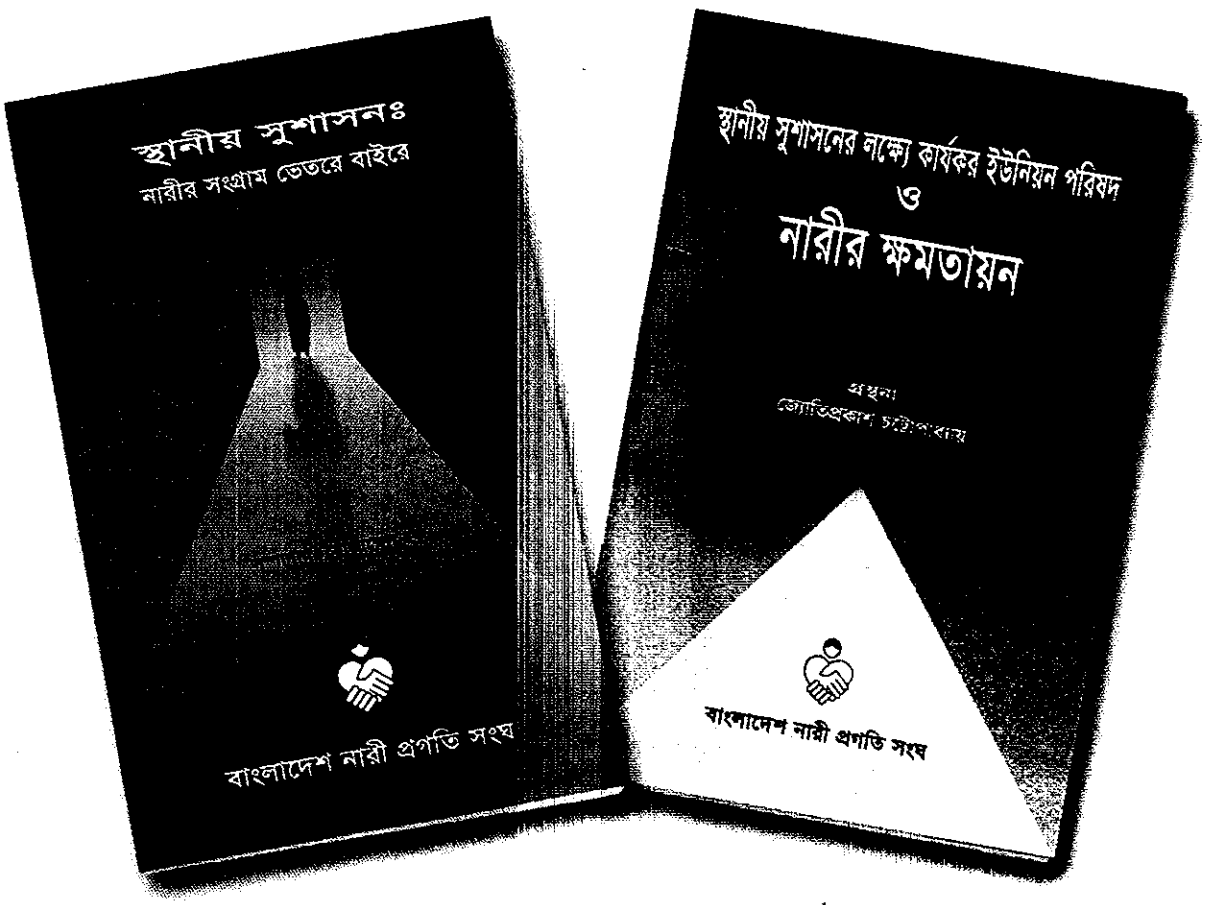
The environmental fisheries and the policy planning community in Bangladesh will ever be indebted to him for his leadership, contribution and human qualities.

LEBs and Community-Based Advocacy

Combining both the supply and demand sides into complementary activities was an approach used by many of the TAF supported partner NGOs. This two-faceted intervention strategy is beneficial in promoting greater accountability and responsiveness in local government bodies, and in catalyzing constituents to increase their involvement in democratic processes in their communities.

Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS)

Bangladesh Nari Pragati Sangha (BNPS) has been in operation since 1986. The programs of BNPS are designed to empower women to claim their legal rights and define their priorities to enhance their autonomy and decision making ability within society. The major components of BNPS's programming include: education for children and adolescent girls, health education and community health care services, institutional capacity building, advocacy for the rights of women and the poor, and training for women on the issues of democractic participation, development goals, and local government roles and responsibilities.



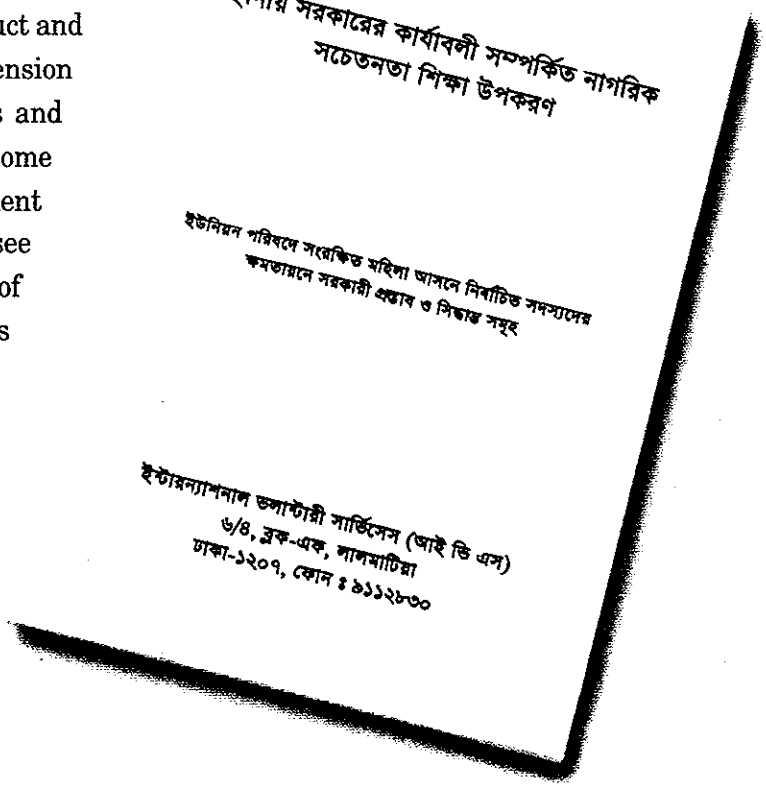
The TAF project "Democracy Education for Effective Local Elected Bodies" has been implemented by BNPS since 1997, in eight unions of the Netrakona district and four unions of the Sandwip upazila of the Chittagong district, covering 366 villages, with the objectives of creating more opportunities for women to participate in local level decision making and of enabling LEBs to be more responsive to the poor, particularly poor women. BNPS activities have focused on training workshops for women leaders to help them better understand democractic principles, local government roles and responsibilities, and development project planning and implementation. BNPS has assisted women LEB members to establish mechanisms for effective two-way communication between themselves and their constitutents, which has permitted community people to meet with local bodies both individually and collectively in order to express their needs and concerns. Furthermore, a new network organized by BNPS unites women UP members of 25 districts to provide support and encouragement to elected women and to improve their interactions with other UP members. As a result of these initiatives with women specifically, women's involvement in local justice processes have improved and their participation in development activities has increased.

Additional activities of the project include conducting training courses for UP members and Chairmen; conducting training sessions for BNPS beneficiary group leaders regarding citizen participation in local government; organizing workshops and sharing meetings with UP officials and community leaders; conducting dialogue sessions between UP officials and their constituents; organizing coordination meetings among elected leaders, appointed government bureaucrats, and NGO staff; and staging theatrical productions and publishing posters and leaflets on relevant issues for the general public.

International Voluntary Services (IVS)

IVS is an international NGO working in Bangladesh since 1972. With TAF support, and through the efforts of eight local partner NGOs, IVS implemented the project "Advocacy Education for Civic Participation" (AECP). The project covered 530 villages in 30 unions of 11 upazilas, located in eight districts. IVS targeted three categories of stakeholders in local government processes: 1) local elected representatives and local government officials, 2) disadvantaged group or association members of the community, and 3) NGOs.

IVS has had notable success in improving local governance at the union level and establishing the UP as the focal point of local development activities in the project areas. UP members have started playing a major role in local governance and in the settlement of disputes, and civil society is beginning to play a role in local governance processes. UP members are now making UP Chairmen accountable to the union parishad in terms of both conduct and administrative management. Extension workers of government departments and line agencies at the UP level have become more active as the local government representatives have begun to oversee their work performance. The rate of tax and revenue collection has increased in all 30 UPs of the project area, and women members are now chairing social development committees. Regular coordination among the UP members, government agencies and civil society has helped to ensure that the selection of recipients of government relief cards is much more equitable.


স্থানীয় সরকারের কার্যাবলী সম্পর্কিত নাগরিক
সচেতনতা শিক্ষা উপকরণ

ইউনিয়ন পরিষদে সংরক্ষিত মহিলা আসনে নির্বাচিত সদস্যদের
ক্ষমতায়নে সরকারী প্রস্তাব ও সিদ্ধান্ত সমূহ

ইন্টারন্যাশনাল ভলান্টারী সার্ভিসেস (আই ভি এস)
৬/৪, ব্লক-এফ, লালমাটিয়া
ঢাকা-১২০৭, ফোন ঃ ৯১১২৮৩০

In addition, IVS has conducted training sessions for male and female LEB members on administrative skills, development planning, and budget preparation; training for common citizens in advocacy and civic rights and responsibilities; workshops and seminars for constitutents and NGO leaders to discuss holding LEBs accountable and insisting on transparent processes; and meetings for government administrators, NGO staff, community leaders, and beneficiary group members to discuss dispute resolution, functions of LEBs, and the performance and transparency of UPs.

One of the particular emphases of the IVS project with TAF support under the DP is the establishment of community budget meetings. IVS partners, like the organization Sachetan in Rajshahi, gather together school teachers, rural doctors, wealthy farmers, youth, traditional social leaders, *imams* (Muslim priests), and other community elite to participate in the formulation of the UP's development budget. In addition IVS partners have worked in their respective areas to empower NGOs to serve as watch-dog organizations, monitoring the actions of their UPs and holding them accountable to campaign and other promises.

Uttaran

Originating in 1985, Uttaran was founded to uphold the cause of the poor and underprivileged, primarily landless persons, women, and untouchables, in the southwestern area of Bangladesh. Uttaran works in six upazilas, 19 unions, and 391 villages, forming beneficiary groups to administer programs in credit, gender awareness, agricultural development, livestock and fish culture, non-formal education, and environmental protection. Uttaran particularly emphasizes organizing groups for social advocacy on issues like water resource management, arsenic mitigation, tree plantation, and disaster preparedness.

With TAF support under the DP, Uttaran started the project "Strengthening LEBs to Meet Customers' Need for Social Development" in 1999. This project has focused on training in capacity building for LEBs, training in grassroots mobilization for community members, and the formation of women UP members' associations in 62 unions, with participation from all of the women members currently. Uttaran's innovative approach includes not only training on the day-to-day roles and responsibilities of UPs, but also information about important social issues like women and children trafficking, arsenic mitigation, environmental resource management, and caste problems. Uttaran has also made a special effort to involve journalists in their training programs in order to encourage their active participation in holding LEB members accountable for their actions and decisions.

Uttaran has formed ward and union level committees for community people, which meet quarterly and monthly, respectively. At these committee meetings, Uttaran has provided members with orientation training on roles and responsibilities of the UP, community development issues, mechanisms for participation by community members in UP decision making processes, and relations between UP members and NGO staff in the local area. At the regular meetings, Uttaran trainers conduct sessions on social issues. In addition, Uttaran has been publishing a bi-monthly newsletter entitled "Upakul Barta," which is distributed among local NGOs, opinion leaders, LEBs, social workers, teachers, and others in the community.

Because of Uttaran's experience in mobilizing groups for advocacy and reform, their approach to enhancing the effectiveness of LEBs has also included innovations in this methodology. For example, Uttaran formed a Water Management Committee made up of representatives – both NGO staff and UP members – from many of the unions in the southwestern region, which experienced a severe water logging problem. This committee is an excellent example of collaboration between civil society and government.

Shariatpur Development Society (SDS)

Shariatpur Development Society (SDS) works in 329 villages in 37 unions of three thanas in Shariatpur district. TAF-supported programs under the DP focus on training community members, especially women, to approach local elected bodies to advocate for better public services. Before SDS's intervention, many UP members in intervention areas did not participate in development activities; by uniting community members through a series of sharing meetings, training sessions, and workshops, SDS encouraged UP members to participate fully in development activities and improve coordination between themselves, upazila and district officers, and other local stakeholders. The combined pressure of citizens and their elected representatives has forced administrative officials and government service workers to spend more time in the field and communicate more regularly with community members.

In addition, as a result of these sharing events, community leaders, disadvantaged persons, and women are increasingly advocating on their own behalf with UP members in order to demand better services and to discuss relevant development issues. Furthermore, women UP members have gained confidence and enhanced their bargaining power, especially with regard to VGD card distribution.

Best Practices

LEB-Related Activities

As a result of their cooperation and motivation, NGOs have developed new strategies for improving local governance and witnessed excellent results. NGOs now view LEBs as an integral element of their community development programs. The success of NGO programming with TAF support under the DP significantly changed the attitude of participating NGOs regarding their ability to positively influence local governance through their work with local elected bodies and citizens groups. Moreover, LEBs have begun to see NGOs as valuable partners in local governance, and as resources for capacity building and other technical support. Citizens, too, perceive the value of closer interaction with LEBs through NGO programs.

Ensuring rights of disadvantaged, not just elites, to government resources

Local government before the DP had long been considered to be under the influence of local elites with greater wealth and power than their poorer, disadvantaged neighbors. With TAF support to partner NGOs under the DP, LEBs have taken significant steps towards listening to the needs and opinions of a much broader cross section of society, and towards taking concrete action to mobilize and allocate resources that will benefit the poor as well as the wealthy and middle class. On the reverse side of the equation, with partner NGO workshops and advocacy opportunities, the community members themselves, even the most disadvantaged ones, have also been speaking more boldly and advocating on their own behalf to claim their rights to government resources.

Standardizing financial, office, and record management

TAF-supported NGOs have provided specific technical assistance directly to UPs to teach them about standard accounting procedures, and to help them to institute consistent, accurate office and other data record management. These workshops and training sessions have enabled UP Chairmen and members to be more thorough, diligent, and accountable in their handling of budgets, licenses, taxes, and registration records, among others.

Ensuring constituent access to information about budgets, resources, registration records and LEB decisions

With TAF partner NGOs conducting training in open policies and procedures, and holding UPs accountable to such transparency, LEBs in intervention areas have instituted posting budgets, funds allocations from central government, and minutes of meetings on public bulletin boards,

and they have made record books on birth, marriage, and death registrations open and accessible to community members if they desire. This change in behavior has greatly improved the level of trust and credibility that UPs have earned among their constituents.

Improving resource mobilization and utilization

UP members are learning, through TAF partner NGO workshops, how to better design budgets and workplans, and how to manage the utilization of human and financial resources to undertake many of their most important functions. Consequently, LEB members have been able to efficiently and competently arrange for tree plantation for income sources for local people, for participation in necessary infrastructure development like road maintenance and canal digging, and for more equitable handling of tax assessment and collection. Community members in intervention areas are much better satisfied that the funds and human resources available to their UPs are being used wisely and for the benefit of the entire community.

Promoting equitable distribution of VGD, rehabilitation, and other special allowances

UP members have learned from their training and interactions with their constitutents that it is important for them to wield their authority judiciously, especially with regard to relief, elderly, and other allowances that the government makes available to the poorest of the poor. Constituents are also empowered to hold their LEB members accountable after having benefitted from the training and awareness raising campaigns of TAF's partner NGOs under the DP. As a result, UP members are being much more equitable in handing out the relief they are authorized to distribute.

Ensuring Chairmen do not dominate all LEB activities and women participate as men do

NGOs under the DP have focused much attention on empowering all of the UP members to speak up at meetings, to understand budget and development processes, to assert their leadership in implementing activities, and to offer their views on local concerns. With this assistance and encouragement, LEB members participate much more than they did previously, no longer allowing UP Chairmen to dominate the discussions and decision making as has traditionally been the case. Furthermore, in addressing gender sensitivity issues at DP project workshops, NGOs have not only empowered women to speak up and claim their right to participate, but they have also encouraged Chairmen to seek the advice and participation of all the members, especially women.

Creating women's networks

The formation of associations at the upazila level for all women UP members has been extremely beneficial to many women leaders. They have found the strength, confidence, and

practical suggestions they need to become more effective in handling gender bias and addressing the challenges of their duties as elected officials. These women at the local level form the foundation for increased women's leadership in other roles throughout Bangladesh. With time, greater experience, and the continued support of women's networks, many of these female officials will likely run for higher offices as opportunities arise.[6] In this way, even more improved representation of women by women will evolve.

Promoting regular interaction with female constituents, to understand their problems

The workshops that partner NGOs have sponsored have ensured that women have access to their UP members, both male and female. Women have had positive interaction with their representatives and experienced greater confidence in identifying their problems, particularly in health, education, village *shalish* (mediation councils), marriage maintenance, divorce, respect for their inheritance rights, and other concerns. Women in intervention groups have been most comfortable speaking with their female LEB members, which has given them greater confidence and the assurance that some elected representatives are truly working on their behalf. It has also increased their confidence to approach male members and their Chairmen as well.

Ensuring participation of constituents, female as well as male, in articulating development and resource allocation priorities

The training sessions that TAF has supported through partner NGOs under the DP have helped constituents to understand the functions that UPs serve with regard to planning, budgeting, and implementing development projects, which in turn has helped them to know what they can expect from their elected officials. In addition, the workshops, seminars, and *uthan baithak* (courtyard meetings) have given community people the forums in which to voice their desires, needs, and expectations. In some places, for the first time all members of a community have the opportunity to engage their elected representatives and to participate in their own development.

Coordinating meetings among all stakeholders

The coordination meetings which DP partners have sponsored have been instrumental in bringing together all the players who can positively affect development in their communities: government agencies, NGOs, community-based organizations, and community leaders. The

[6]The Asia Foundation, *Voices of Women: A New Era of Political Leadership in Bangladesh*, pp 5-6.

ongoing dialogue in which these parties now engage has benefitted all members of the community greatly, making development efforts more focused, streamlined, efficient, and need-based.

Promoting primary education, health, and family planning

With the community members participating as never before in expressing their opinions about what kinds of development projects must be prioritized, the UPs have come to understand that many people are very concerned about primary education for their children, about health information and health care for all members of their families, and about improving their circumstances by controlling the number and spacing of their child births. As a result, LEBs in intervention areas have seen a marked increase in the promotion of these particular kinds of projects.

Lobbying local branches of national agencies to deliver basic services

For many years the district and upazila offices of such ministries as health, education, and agriculture have been remiss in delivering the basic services which are supposed to be their agencies' core business. As a result of NGO awareness raising, training sessions, and coordination meetings, both UP members and the people of communities themselves are initiating lobbying efforts to demand that these basic services are provided, in keeping with the government's purposes and plans.

Community-Based Advocacy Activities

The advocacy programs undertaken by TAF's partners under the DP have contributed to mobilizing the general public in different locations of Bangladesh, motivating them to demand changes in their social, economic, legal, and political circumstances. Empowering the poor to advocate on their own behalf transforms the structures of communities, encouraging previously disadvantaged persons to become participants in their own development, and giving them hope to dream of a life with better options for future generations. The objectives of the advocacy initiatives at the grassroots level were similar for each NGO partner, but the impact varied from place to place depending on specific community conditions. Nonetheless, certain common best practices and lessons learned can be concluded from their work.

Birth of grassroots-level, good governance advocacy

Activities by TAF-supported NGOs under the DP in advocacy have been unique and groundbreaking in Bangladesh. These programs were designed by the partners to mobilize the general public into pressure groups for the enforcement of their rights, the adherence to policies already adopted by different government entities, and the protection of constitutionally mandated participatory planning processes to address community problems. These interventions brought about tangible, positive results with regard to tax collection, improvement of drinking water and sanitation conditions, distribution of *khas* land, construction of roads, distribution of VGD (Vulnerable Group Development) cards, and provision of flood relief. The achievements of the various initiatives under the DP were accomplished by educating union parishad members on their roles and responsibilities and by developing a cooperative working relationship between them and their constituents. The overall aim was to broaden the UP development agenda beyond a focus on the construction and maintenance of village infrastructure, to include education on human rights, primary health care, clean water, sanitation and women's empowerment. In addition, the program helped citizens to advocate with local government to acquire government services to which they are entitled but which are often neglected, like agriculture extension information and subsidized fertilizer and insecticides.

Therefore the advocacy initiatives launched by these partners were highly effective in influencing development at the grassroots in ways that could not be achieved through national-level, policy-oriented advocacy. Furthermore, now that common citizens have been empowered to understand what they can expect from their local leaders in terms of implementation of development and protection of rights, they are much better able to launch their own campaigns on other issues as they emerge in their communities, creating a strong, sustainable grassroots movement.

Transforming social classes by ensuring poor people's access to land

In Bangladesh, land is a key ingredient to wealth, social status, and political influence. Very few people at the top of a steep social pyramid control most of the land resources in this agriculturally based country, with huge numbers of marginal landholders and landless people

forming the vast base of the population. Furthermore, landless people are on the increase in society, and with few employment alternatives to agricultural labor, they are definitely disadvantaged in terms of authority, autonomy, and economic survival.

The introduction of initiatives to advocate for legally guaranteed access to *khas* lands and natural resources like water bodies and wetlands has truly transformed society in these rural areas. *Samity* members of partner NGOs have become more unified in their approach and stronger in their insistence on demanding their rightful share of resources with local elected bodies and community leaders. The awareness raising activities, training workshops, management committees, and group formation and leadership development interventions all contribute to building the confidence of the extremely poor and landless, enhancing their financial and physical security, and changing the attitudes of the elite toward greater concern and respect for these disadvantaged individuals in society.

Ensuring women's equal rights and decision making power

Women in Bangladesh also traditionally lack status, financial and other resources, and decision making authority. The initiatives undertaken by TAF's implementing partners have empowered women as well as poor men to be more forceful in claiming their legal rights and entitlements. As a result, women have participated much more in local government activities and have attained a higher status and more influence in their families and communities. They feel that they have greater security against being abandoned by their husbands or being treated with disrespect and even violence in their communities now. Many women also feel better equipped to claim legal protection in domestic and land issues.

For example, one woman beneficiary in Pabna cited the fact that since participating in the advocacy workshops, she has registered her house so that it is legally in her name as well as her husband's, observing, "If my husband leaves me he won't be able to have any rights on my land, as it is a joint property now." Another woman group member commented on how she was able to handle her daughter's complicated divorce dispute, a task she did not feel capable of dealing with before she joined the advocacy group.

Establishing vehicles for expressing citizen demands

Groups formed or utilized by advocacy programs under the DP have demonstrated to citizens the value of community collaboration to express their demands and hold their LEBs accountable. Insistence on the active participation of all members, and focus on such activities as training members on the electoral process, developing leadership skills and confidence, promoting good institutional governance within and among the groups, creating an atmosphere in which participation is encouraged, and urging more women to seek leadership positions, have modeled for beneficiaries the significance of democratic principles.

Establishing new value of public service

Common citizens for the first time have begun to understand that the concept of public service is far different from the traditional idea of patronage that has been handed down through many

generations in Bangladesh. Historically, poor people and women have depended on the largesse and compassion of wealthy and influential patrons to assist them with resources and opportunties. Many people had been socialized so that they had no understanding at all of the democratic idea of elected representatives who act in the best interest of the public whom they serve. With TAF supported interventions under the DP, communities are much more cognizant of this idea of public service, and they respect its value and efficacy. Furthermore, they are developing a sense of the rightfulness of demanding this kind of treatment from their elected leaders.

Improving representation at *shalish* and other decision making bodies

The advocacy programs of TAF's NGO partners emphasized ensuring that the rural poor, especially women, be active in local decision making processes. One important formal decision making body is the *shalish,* a village or UP mediation body which settles petty civil and criminal disputes. Since the DP interventions, the disadvantaged have indeed been asserting their rights at *shalish,* participating in the rulings, and helping to make them less arbitrary and more in keeping with stated law. When there are people of the aggrieved's own socio-economic class present to represent their point of view and their interests, the *shalish* goes much more smoothly and persons are much better satisfied with the results. In this way, the disadvantaged have a voice and a chance for fairness which they had previously been denied.

Women, too, have become much more active in *shalish.* They have come out from seclusion and the confinement of their traditional roles to access the informal justice system on their own behalf. Many women in intervention areas feel that their better representation in *shalish* by women UP members or NGO staff committed to protecting their rights has also led to changes in how they are viewed in the community and the family. Domestic violence, harrassment, and gender violence have decreased as a result of their new role as decision makers and their insistence on their legal protections. Many women group members stated that they feel much better able to handle themselves in incidents of potential threat or disruption now.

Better enforcing of laws and carrying out of duties by local government

TAF partner NGOs' advocacy interventions included intensive awareness raising and training activities on existing laws and important factors for development. These initiatives not only had impact on the general public, but also on LEB members. Government elected officials became more highly motivated to play their proper roles and carry out their appropriate responsibilities, including assessing and collecting taxes, disposing of cases at village court expeditiously and impartially, and maintaining accurate records in the register books at the UP offices.

The impact of this new emphasis on proper responsibility was clearly documented in intervention areas and can be seen in higher numbers of death and birth registrations; fewer incidences of child marriage, *hilla* (interim) marriage, and polygamy; increased challenges to *talak* (pronounced) divorces and the termination of illegal toll collection by a UP member. Access to local resources like *khas* land and canals for fishing was also dramatically changed due to the increased responsiveness of LEBs in intervention areas. Because they are more motivated and knowledgable, project beneficiaries now insist on the enforcement of laws and regulations and voluntarily follow them on their own as well.

Looking Towards the Future

Democracy Partnership programs have changed the perceptions of citizens and NGOs about the willingness and capacity of LEBs to improve the local community. LEBs are seen as more democratic, competent, and responsive to their constituents. As a result of DP interventions, citizens are more aware of their rights, able to articulate their demands, more confident about interacting with local government officials, and equipped with better information about women's rights and discrimination. Community members who once felt powerless are now approaching government officials with their concerns, participating in local decision making, and holding their elected representatives accountable for their actions. Citizens perceive LEBs as more efficient and more likely to improve their local community.

TAF's partner organizations through the DP have learned from valuable experience that these kinds of programs to improve the effectiveness and responsiveness of local government can be further refined to provide even greater sustainability and increased impact in the future. Some suggestions for how these refinements can be accomplished are cited below.

Enhance role of women

Even more effort needs to be given toward incorporating women as equal members of the LEBs, with the same roles and responsibilities. Having reserved seats for women ensures some participation and representation, of course, but encouraging women to run for the general seats as well, competing directly with male candidates, would be evidence of even greater progress toward gender equality. Furthermore, greater boldness by women members in demanding committee assignments and participating in budgeting and financial management processes will also increase their contributions and their representation of women constituents. Forging ties with constituents in the large wards which women represent in their reserved seats will also help establish a strong core of women from local communities who are capable and desirous of district and national positions of leadership.

With continued gender sensitivity training, enhanced support through the women members associations in unions, upazilas, and districts throughout the country, and more positive experiences on the UPs themselves between male and female members, such enhanced participation by women can be achieved.

Increase funding base through more equitable tax assessment and collection

A decided hindrance in the accomplishment of development objectives to benefit the poor, disadvantaged, women, and other members of communities is the lack of financial resources. As WAVE's experiences demonstrate, community participation not only in decision making about expenditures, but also in decision making about assessing and collecting taxes, will

increase the funding base for development projects. Citizens are more willing to comply with their obligations to pay taxes if they know that the tax system is fair and equitable, and that collection methods show honesty and integrity. Further programming emphasis should be placed on ensuring mechanisms for community members and leaders to participate in the overall tax system so that some of local government officials' concerns about lack of resources can be adequately addressed.

Standardize training and awareness raising materials

Once NGO staff have laid the foundation for training and information dissemination to inform citizens and UP members about the roles and reponsibilities of LEBs, the next step is for these parties to take greater ownership over these processes to reduce dependence on NGOs. Community leaders and UP Chairmen and members should begin working now to standardize training workshops and manuals and awareness raising materials in order to use them annually to inform initially and/or refresh the knowledge of voters and officials about democratic principles and obligations. New materials could also be introduced periodically to provide a fresh means of informing people and reminding them of these concepts.

As these materials are re-used, and as new materials are introduced, changes in the cultural and societal consciousness will emerge. Gradually democratic principles and understanding of rights will take hold in communities collectively, and better governance will ensue as a direct consequence.

Institutionalize community meetings

In a similar fashion, community meetings which bring together LEB members, community leaders, NGO workers, and the broader constituency should be institutionalized so that all parties expect regular interaction to exchange views. Annual town meetings are one possible forum, but constitutents should also be able to expect even more frequent, institutionalized gatherings during which their elected representatives solicit the input of common citizens. Public hearings, for example, should be convened prior to the implementation of any approved large-scale development initiative to determine the level of constituent support and hear any possible concerns.

In these ways, community participation and interaction with elected officials will be ensured. This will in turn lead to an ingrained expectation that constituents can access their representatives and discuss their needs, problems, and suggested solutions with them as a regular course of activitiy in the years to come.

Coordinate community and national advocacy on certain issues

The NGO partners expressed the concern that certain issues cannot be adequately and completely addressed only at the grassroots level, but efforts should be taken to address these

at the national level, too. Civil society groups of different levels could create an advocacy platform in coordination with local level advocacy, especially to ensure direct accountability of the bureaucracy to elected officials. Furthermore, MPs must be directly elected from and serve only one constituency, and they should be required to reside in that constituency. These measures will ensure that local needs are more clearly understood and better addressed, and they will increase the accountability of these elected officials to the people. In this way, both local and national governance will be structured so as to ensure responsiveness and accountability.

Ensure strong complementarity between governance and access to justice programs

Strongly related to the issue of improving good governance is that of increasing access to justice on behalf of the disadvantaged. DP programs have demonstrated that common citizens not only gain a greater understanding of good governance from interventions with LEBs and community-based advocacy groups directly, but they also acquire this knowledge through programs in legal awareness, ADR, and legal aid. Both sets of activities have contributed to an overall sense of improved governance and justice in local communities in intervention areas of partner NGOs. Disadvantaged people who never before understood that they had rights under the Constitution and never had the expectation that the legal system and local elected bodies would protect their rights, serve their interests, and provide them with basic services, are for the first time adopting this view of government institutions. The continued complementarity of both kinds of programs will help more people to grasp these concepts in the future, and even further progress to be made in obtaining better performance from executive and judicial bodies.

Promote cooperation between NGOs and the government bureaucracy

Greater access by NGOs to appointed government administrative personnel at the upazila and district levels would enable citizens to benefit from increased coordination, especially of more complex issues that affect local communities, such as land distribution. An important facet of continued advocacy, therefore, is for NGOs to build networks and alliances with those who are in institutional positions so that both civil society and government can together serve the public better. As these coalitions are built, future efforts will go even more smoothly because bureaucratic bottlenecks can be eliminated and requirements of the state machinery can be streamlined.

In addition, once community members, through NGO advocacy groups, have instituted strong ties to government officials and earned a reputation of respect, their efforts will not be hindered due to the frequent changing of personnel. Part of the reality of government administration is that staff appointments to different positions are frequently handed down,

and sometimes this can be disruptive to attempts to advocate within the ranks. The expectation is that with time and continued excellent results, this obstacle can be lessened.

Encourage the evolution of NGO groups into citizen-run special interest organizations

In other democracies, community advocacy groups often begin around one particular issue or through one particular kind of vehicle, but they obtain energy and sustainability through evolution into citizen-run special interest organizations that continue to fill a need in society. In the same way groups in Bangladesh which are originally formed as part of NGO beneficiary programs could possibly transform into sustainable collections of citizens who share common interests and motivations and desire to continue to influence and engage their elected representatives. With this kind of evolution, democratic practices will progress and deepen even further and be even more oriented to the ordinary citizen and local communities.

Promote decentralized, participatory policymaking dialogue

Advocacy at the local level has made significant impact on more responsive government, but a new mindset needs to be achieved in Bangladesh for there to be lasting change. Continued devolving of power from the highest levels of government down to levels which are closer to the people is a prerequisite to more mature democratic processes. Therefore, along with modifications in grassroots advocacy for the future, there must also be emphasis on changes in structure and methods of governance which create a more decentralized system.

Steps in this direction are the proposed upazila councils, so that there are elected representatives, not appointed bureaucrats, at the next highest level of government after the union. At present the Bangladesh system consists only of elected union parishad, then two layers of appointed officials, leading up to the elected Members of Parliament (MPs) at the national level. This structure creates a situation in which policy discussion and decision making takes place at a point far removed from the common citizen. Also, greater accountability via the electorate at the level which controls the most sizeable financial resources for development and accessing the greatest measure of human capital would improve governance even further.

In addition, those UP members who would be interested in and capable of running for higher elected office would have another level at which to participate if there were an upazila council. Under the present system, there is no reasonable next step for greater participation, as many of the UP members would not be qualified or confident enough to run as an MP. This kind of decentralized system would infuse greater democratic participation throughout the government and would help to grow new leaders, which could only serve to benefit the nation.

Examine regulations which hinder grassroots advocacy

The state has an important role in providing a policy and legal framework that can institute new channels for the participation of the common people, as well as particular development projects that will meet the needs of the people. As long as the mechanisms are in place to allow free expression and to encourage maximum participation, local communities can organize themselves, identify their problems, make their own development decisions, and oversee the projects' implementation. In some instances, useful projects are being hindered because of regulations which make grassroots movements cumbersome or which inhibit freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. These laws should be reviewed, re-examined, and even repealed in order to encourage maximum participation by citizens in their own government.

Build capacity of advocacy groups

In order to strengthen the community advocacy groups, initiatives must be implemented to build their social cohesion and create self-management capability. Future advocacy programs should rely even more on increasing the institution building dimension of interventions, including training in leadership, management, and social mediation skills, in order to create autonomous organizations capable of initiating, directing and managing their own development projects. Depending on the education level and experience of beneficiaries, to some extent other kinds of assistance may be necessary as well — for example, education in literacy and numeracy, and training in identification of local resources. Steps should also be taken to train the groups in self-management and internal financing in order to help them to become sustainable without NGO assistance in future.